LEFT BEHIND

TJ Collamore

AP U.S. History

June 7, 2025

The United States military upholds a core principle: never abandon a fallen soldier on the battlefield. Rooted in the values of loyalty, honor, and sacrifice, this evolving tradition fosters trust, cohesion, and morale. Although the warrior ethos of not leaving a comrade behind has existed in some form for thousands of years, it has been applied inconsistently. For example, at least six years after the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in AD 9, the Roman general Germanicus returned to the site of the battle and buried the remains of his slain soldiers.[1] Meanwhile, the first two centuries of United States military history did not consistently uphold the principle. During the final year of the Civil War, "the road from Washington to Richmond was paved with bodies clad in blue and gray,"[2] and in World War I, a soldier at the battle of Passchendaele recalled that the dead "just had to lie there until they disappeared into the mud…. You couldn't do anything about the dead, and there were so many bodies about that you got callous about it."[3] Fifty years later, however, during the Vietnam War, an inflection point emerged. Despite continued cases of abandonment–such as that of Lieutenant Commander Allan Collamore, who was missing in action for decades after being shot down on a reconnaissance mission in North Vietnam—[4] a deeper selflessness and sense of brotherhood had taken root. As the war dragged on, and the national support waned amid unclear objectives, search and rescue of the 2,339 Missing in Action (MIA) and 766 Prisoner of War (POW)[5] "began to replace all others as the most critical mission,"[6] and stories of reckless self-sacrificial heroism emerged. In the decades that followed,

[1] Pat Southern, *The Roman Army: A Social and Institutional History* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 295-296.
[2] Darrel D. Whitcomb, *The Rescue of Bat 21* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 212.
[3] Lyn Macdonald, *Passchendaele : the Story of the Third Battle of Ypres 1917* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 180.
[4] "Service Member Lt. Cmdr. ALLAN PHILIP COLLAMORE JR.," Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, last modified March 7, 2003, accessed June 7, 2025, https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/dpaaProfile?id=a0Jt000000sFDegEAG.
[5] "Vietnam War Statistics," Vietnam Veterans of America, last modified December 1998, accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.vva310.org/vietnam-war-statistics.
[6] Whitcomb, 211.

the unwritten "No Man Left Behind" principle was codified into formal U.S. military doctrine.[7] [8] However, codifying this warrior ethos takes things too far. While the informal policy of "No Man Left Behind" practiced during the Vietnam War fostered loyalty and unity, institutionalizing it into a rigid military ethos, rather than granting field commanders operational discretion, creates a paradox that contributes to increased military casualties and distracts from mission accomplishment.

There are numerous compelling reasons to bring back fallen comrades, dead or alive, that are both strategic and moral. Captured soldiers were often exploited for propaganda purposes, and high-value personnel such as pilots posed particular risks. As one veteran explained, pilots "knew a lot of stuff; the military did not want their knowledge to get into the hands of the enemy."[9] Moreover, research confirms that "soldier morale is directly tied to the belief that they will be evacuated if wounded, or rescued if shot down."[10] Conversely, abandoning a comrade can inflict deep psychological damage on survivors. As one account describes, leaving men behind "creates a monumental case of survivor's guilt,"[11] as seen in the mental collapse of Sergeant Major Whalen after being forced to leave two comrades behind; he was a "fine soldier, loved by everyone, but nothing could stop those haunting screams in his head."[12]

Codifying the principle of "No Man Left Behind" should not be interpreted as requiring the immediate evacuation of every fallen soldier from the battlefield. As one analysis notes, "going back…years later to recover remains still accomplishes the intent of the ethic," though "to the soldier on the ground, such reasoning may be lost in the heat of battle."[13] This case was

---

[7] "Ranger Creed," U.S. Army, accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.army.mil/values/ranger.html.
[8] "Soldier's Creed," U.S. Army, accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.army.mil/values/soldiers.html.
[9] Joel Collamore, telephone interview by the author, Westford, MA, June 6, 2025.
[10] Earl H. Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961–1975* (Washington DC: US Air Force, 1980), 3.
[11] John L. Plaster, *SOG : The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York: Onyx, 1998), 55.
[12] Plaster, 55.
[13] Leonard Wong, *Leave No Man Behind* (Sage Publications, 2005), 599-622.

exemplified in the case of Allan "Skip" Collamore, whose remains were discovered, returned, and subsequently identified with DNA analysis in 2003, thirty-six years after his fighter jet disappeared over the jungles of North Vietnam.[14] While the reality of death is difficult, "the finality of that determination is more comforting than leaving the question unanswered."[15] Joel Collamore, Skip's brother, described the emotional impact on their mother: "It absolutely brought a sense of closure to her… She was not the same person after her son had disappeared… It was evident she was hanging on to see if we could get him home… She passed away peacefully two years after his remains were identified."[16] This sentiment was echoed by Alice Stratton, wife of POW Lieutenant Commander Richard Stratton, who told *LIFE* magazine in 1967, "That takes real courage, going day to day and not even knowing if there's a warm body over there."[17] Importantly, Joel Collamore also expressed his belief that the military weighed the risks of recovery: "If other lives were lost in an attempted rescue, we would not have been told by the government. While Skip would have wanted peace for his family, none of us, Skip included, would have wanted others endangered in a futile rescue attempt."[18] During the Vietnam War, military leaders had the discretion to carefully weigh these factors. Had the AirMan's Creed stated then what it states now, that "I will never leave an Airman behind,"[19] commanders may have felt even more compelled to undertake high-risk rescues that might have endangered others. As one military analyst observes, "inserting the standard into an ethos… removes a degree of freedom from the commander's ability to make a decision. It is better to let all the factors at the unit, institutional, and societal level work on that commander—and yet still allow the

[14] Collamore.
[15] Wong, 599-622.
[16] Collamore.
[17] Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, "U.S. Prisoners in North Vietnam," *LIFE*, October 20, 1967, 34.
[18] Collamore.
[19] PACE, "Airman's Creed," last modified July 20, 2015, PDF.

commander to decide whether to mount a recovery operation."[20] In this way, organizations like the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency can fulfill "our nation's obligation by maximizing the number of missing personnel accounted for"[21] in the years and decades that follow without compromising battlefield decision-making.

Numerous examples from the Vietnam War demonstrate how rigid adherence to the "No Man Left Behind" ethos led to unnecessary casualties in a futile attempt to perform a rescue. One of the most tragic cases was the rescue mission for Lieutenant Colonel Iceal Hambleton, who was behind enemy lines.[22] The United States launched an immediate rescue operation codenamed Rescue of Bat 21 Bravo. Helicopters and aircraft were repeatedly dispatched in eight separate attempts to save Hambleton, all of which failed. These missions resulted in multiple aircraft being shot down, leaving the would-be rescuers killed and captured by the enemy.[23] As the rescue efforts escalated, Northern Vietnamese forces adapted, studying American rescue patterns and establishing ambushes in anticipated landing zones. The U.S. lost 14 additional soldiers, another two were captured, and three others were stranded on the ground awaiting rescue.[24] Commander Micheal Thornton concluded that the "whole effort was very costly to us. A lot of courageous people gave their lives to try and recover our own folks."[25] The consequences also reverberated on the ground. Morale among frontline troops declined as they witnessed the heavy losses and questioned the judgment of their commanders; as one account noted, "they question the rescues to this day."[26] In this case, the noble attempt to retrieve a fallen

---

[20] Wong, 599-622
[21] "Vision, Mission and Values," Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.dpaa.mil/About/Vision-Mission-Values/.
[22] Michael Thornton, interview by Thomas Norris, San Antonio, TX, May 5, 2001.
[23] Robert E. Stoffey, *Fighting to Leave: The Final Years of America's War in Vietnam, 1972–1973* (USA: Quarto Publishing Group, 2008).
[24] Thornton.
[25] Thornton.
[26] Whitcomb, 229.

airman, driven by the emerging codification of "No Man Left Behind," ultimately caused a cascade of casualties. Rather than preserving life, rigid adherence to the doctrine led to exponentially greater loss. Military leaders must retain the ability to assess risk and exercise discretion; institutionalizing recovery operations as an unquestionable mandate can transform a principle of loyalty into a source of unnecessary sacrifice.

Another case in which the "No Man Left Behind" ethos backfired occurred in 1966 during a rescue operation codenamed Operation Crimson Tide, aimed at recovering Captain Carl Jackson, a POW. Rather than conducting a careful assessment of the risks, commanders hastily coordinated a mission driven by a desire to uphold the emerging recovery principle. The rescue team was misinformed that no enemy forces were present within a ten-mile radius. In reality, the team was dropped directly into a Northern Vietnamese battalion of 1,000 enemy soldiers.[27] The consequences were catastrophic: twelve rescuers were killed, seventeen went missing, two helicopters were shot down, and an entire platoon was lost.[28] Tragically, the chaos of the operation led to friendly fire, as reinforcing U.S. aircraft mistakenly bombed their own men. Though "the family and friends of Captain Carl Jackson … will appreciate the sacrifices made to try to rescue him,"[29] he remains MIA. Operation Crimson Tide underscores the perils of institutionalizing "No Man Left Behind" as an inflexible military doctrine. The lack of planning and failure to evaluate risks appropriately transformed a high-stakes recovery mission into a disaster, resulting in far more lives lost than potentially saved. Efforts to recover POWs and MIAs must be based on strategic judgment, not emotional impulse. Upholding the principle of leaving no one behind should never override the tactical need for discretion. As Operation

---

[27] George J. Veith, *Code-name Bright Light : the Untold Story of U.S. POW Rescue Efforts during the Vietnam War* (New York: Free Press, 1998).
[28] Clyde Sincere, "Operation Crimson Tide," *MACVSOG's First Major 'Bright Light' Mission*, October 1966.
[29] Plaster, 69.

Crimson Tide illustrates, prematurely launching a rescue operation under dangerous conditions may not only fail to secure the prisoner but also result in a greater toll on those sent in to help.

A further example of the risks posed by rigid adherence to the "No Man Left Behind" principle occurred during Operation Lam Son 719 in 1971. Forty United States helicopters were deployed to extract trapped soldiers. Anticipating the rescue, enemy forces launched a coordinated attack and hit twenty-eight helicopters.[30] The enemy exploited the "No Man Left Behind" policy to anticipate and prepare for the United States' rescue. A similar case involved a Special Operations Group (SOG) mission to recover the soldiers left by Whalen; the enemy had booby-trapped the body with a hand grenade.[31] Codifying this principle into the United States military creeds is dangerous: the destroyed equipment and significant loss of life for a single rescue effort were not worth the risks. While the moral commitment to recover every fallen soldier is admirable, it must be tempered with strategic judgment. Misapplied, the policy can lead to disproportionate loss of life and equipment and degrade trust in military command.

The bond of loyalty and camaraderie among soldiers is powerful, often leading them to risk their lives to uphold "No Man Left Behind" ethos. This commitment was exemplified by Army Captain Paris Davis, who, despite being shot numerous times and severely wounded, heard that one of his teammates had been shot in the head on the battlefield. Without hesitation, "he crawled 150 yards and was hit by grenade fragments, causing even more damage to an already beat down body."[32] Acts like this reflect the profound sense of duty soldiers feel for one another. They are driven by a refusal to leave their brothers, determined to bring back everyone, dead or alive. While the heroism is admirable, it directly increases the risk of more casualties. Rather

---

[30] John Prados, "Lam Son 719," The VVA Veteran, last modified December 2015, accessed June 7, 2025, https://vvaveteran.org/35-6/35-6_lamson719.html.
[31] Plaster, 55.
[32] Christopher Hurd, "No Man Left Behind," U.S. Army, last modified March 3, 2023, accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.army.mil/article/264519/no_man_left_behind.

than institutionalize the rule for "No Man Left Behind," to prevent more casualties, commanders must retain the authority to evaluate each situation and, when dictated by ground conditions, delay or forgo a recovery.

The "No Man Left Behind" policy is a double-edged sword; while noble in intent and beneficial for morale, codifying it into creeds can compromise mission objectives and result in unnecessary loss of life. U.S. military leaders must be entrusted to weigh potentially competing priorities: mission success, soldier morale and well-being, and unit effectiveness. Ultimately, however, mission accomplishment must be paramount. As Brigadier General Richard Cross once reflected, "As airmen…we should expect that there are times when as one person, we must be sacrificed for the overall."[33] While leaving no man behind is admirable and perhaps a natural progression for humankind, Cross' insights may represent a more appropriate warrior ethos than an uncompromising directive to never leave an American behind. Unflinching patriotism and self-sacrifice do nothing to diminish the valor of our forces. In fact, they define it. As Master Sergeant Ray Echevarria radioed his would-be rescuers when outnumbered 100 to 1: "That's it guys. It's all over…. When I quit talking, put the shit right on us."[34] Moments later, U.S. aircraft dropped ordnance over his position. Radio communication was lost, and the entire Special Operations team was lost.[35] His final act to sacrifice himself and his men to protect others epitomizes not only courage, but the highest form of duty: placing the mission above self.

[33] Tilford, 119.
[34] Plaster, 59.
[35] Plaster, 59.